

Economic Recovery Panel

Shropshire Council

9th March 2021

1. Summary of the Economic Recovery Panel approach with Shropshire

The Local Government Association was asked by Shropshire Council to deliver an Economic Recovery Panel. This tool has been developed to aid councils in their work relating to the Covid-19 crisis.

The panel ran on the afternoon of Tuesday 9th March 2021 and considered the way in which Covid-19 has impacted Shropshire economically; the approach to the related response undertaken by the council and its partners; and thinking and delivery around the economic recovery. The scope of the panel as agreed by the council was focused on:

- How does the economic strategy need to change in the light of the pandemic, especially with the goal of achieving 'healthy population, healthy economy'?
- How can the tourism element of the economic strategy take advantage of national/regional events in 2022 – Commonwealth Games, Platinum Jubilee – and how does that link with the Big Town Plan, Riverside development etc.?

The session involved the council's Leader; Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Waste and Communications; the Chief Executive; and the Executive Director of Place and was facilitated by:

- Gill Steward, Chair of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and previous local government Chief Executive
- Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of Medway Council

They were supported by James Millington from the Local Government Association.

Economic Recovery Panels are focused on enabling councils to take stock of, and reflect upon, the period since the current crisis began, the way this has impacted and the challenges that lie ahead as the local authority seeks to lead the recovery. Such panels are tailored to meet individual councils' needs and are designed to complement and add value to a council's own mechanisms for identifying areas of good practice, learning and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of the council's plans and activities.

In what is an unprecedented environment, where everybody is learning through experience and precedents are few, peers are using the experience and knowledge they have gained in recent months and drawing on the information presented to them to prompt reflection and discussion amongst the senior political and managerial leadership of the host council.

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's feedback in the light of the discussions during the panel sessions. In providing this to the council, we have done so simply as fellow local government officers and elected members. By its nature, the panel provides a brief and only partial snapshot of a very complex, intense and unique set of happenings in relation to response and emerging plans regarding recovery.

2. Feedback

This panel represented a timely opportunity for the council to reflect on how the previous 12 months of the coronavirus pandemic has impacted Shropshire economically and, importantly, how it is positioning itself to drive the future economic prosperity of the county. Although the council is aware of the impacts likely to be seen over the long-term, including those concerning health, education and employment, it was clear from our discussions that its leadership are focused on making the most of the recovery opportunities for Shropshire in the next phase including towards meeting its goal of achieving a 'healthy population, healthy economy'.

There are substantial foundations for the council to build on as part of its economic recovery strategy, laid down during the pandemic, and this includes building on the relationships with key partners made when establishing the Economic Task Force and Social Impact Taskforce in June 2020. The Economic Taskforce, chaired by the Leader, includes the Chamber of Commerce; Federation of Small Businesses; sector representative groups; and other individuals with influence which the council convenes around shared interests.

Similarly, the council are utilising relationships through the River Severn Partnership to manage the threat of climate change and free up flood risk land; and working with regional structures including Midlands Engine and Midlands Connect around investment and infrastructure. These important and positive relationships with partners will continue to be critical and underpin its future approach to economic recovery across Shropshire. Indeed, the council's task force approach was referenced within Social Finance's [Local Economic Recovery Planning: Playbook for Action](#), commissioned by the LGA.

The council has reflected on its own 'system leadership' role, underlining its assertion that it and other key anchor institutions have not just a responsibility for service delivery but can secure major impact through important decisions around organisational spend; use of land; employment; and the delivery of training, development and skills for the benefit of the county. This has included looking at the opportunities with NHS partners of One Public Estate; education and workforce pathways; accommodation for key workers; joint commissioning with the CCG to reduce system costs and improve outcomes; and enhanced data sharing.

For example, through the Social Impact Taskforce, in order to actively seek further benefits for its communities and residents in relation to job creation, spend with local supply chains and support for community groups, the council has increased its social value weighting for the evaluation of procurement tenders to 20% - and has encouraged other organisations to review their own approaches to influence how the 'Shropshire pound' can be utilised locally. This represents a significant move and examples in other parts of the country, [such as in Manchester](#) where £322m out of a total spend of £461m was spent with locally-based suppliers, demonstrates where council and partner investment can generate huge benefits within the local economy and community. There remains significant opportunity here and the council could go further and work with anchor institutions across the county to increase spend and employment opportunities in the local economy. Decisions about how the council operates to deliver its services and wider discussions with partners across the system will be important - the existing relations present a chance to build on this.

The council describes a healthy population as being critical to a healthy economy, and vice-versa, placing an emphasis on early intervention and prevention and the importance of individuals leading fulfilled lives - which includes economic factors such as skills, development and employment. The council should feel confident in continuing to set out this ambition and build on the trust and confidence you are fostering through working with your partners, using your own power and influence to support a resilient economy through the recovery period.

The task forces have been important fora to bring together key organisations which are committed to making a positive difference to Shropshire. Their activity since June 2020 to manage and monitor key trends; address emerging issues; establish areas of need; and form specific subgroups including Employment and Skills and Town Centre Recovery (partnerships supported by external key stakeholders) has delivered a proactive response which has been hugely valuable. These groups are now being refocused for the future.

The council is now keen to reframe the Economic Task Force to drive future activity. Recasting this body as the focus of the future economic strategy development, driving delivery through the adoption of shared and specific outcomes and thus continuing the momentum presents significant potential for Shropshire. The council has demonstrated its strong and effective system leadership over the last 12 months and this next step presents an opportunity to bring to bear the economic power and influence of partner organisations on shared outcomes for the county.

The council recognises it is well placed to take advantage of some key opportunities in the economic recovery of Shropshire including the inward migrating populations and businesses which are seeking to relocate to the county. Local intelligence is showing how, through the experience of the pandemic, individuals and businesses are considering the relative importance of being in cities and whether there is instead an opportunity to base in more rural areas such as Shropshire. The council can utilise this opportunity and further consider what it can offer to attract relocating businesses for the local employment market; green economy; visitor and heritage economy; and arts and crafts etc., to maximise job creation and skills development opportunities. This also presents an opportunity through the creation of new jobs and training, to help to tackle the historical challenges it has faced around employees moving away from the area. The council will want to continue to consider what this means for business incubation, and the requisite training and development needs.

Shropshire recognises that the robustness of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are critical to its economic vitality and are also key to the agenda around the visitor, heritage and arts economies. During the last 12 months the council has been able to develop a stronger relationship and knowledge of SMEs through the distribution of the Government's business grants and its own support including:

- Implementing social distancing measures to safely manage the reopening of the high streets and town centres
- Installing temporary traffic regulation interventions to help with social distancing requirements
- Processing temporary pavement licensing applications to support Autumn and Winter trading
- Free car parking
- Its 'shop local' campaign and by supporting other local marketing campaigns e.g. Oswestry and Shrewsbury BID's - Shrewsbury's Open and Shrewsbury Open Online and Oswestry back open for business.

Closer links with businesses and a greater knowledge of their needs has all contributed to building trust. The council has recognised the importance of making its communities feel safe and confident when using its towns during the pandemic and invested time and resources into implementing Covid-safe precautions. Feedback from businesses and visitors has been positive and the council consider the role it has in making people 'feel safe' to be an important factor in continuing to attract visitors in the future.

With a large number of local independent retailers it will be key to continue to focus on their needs, including the impact of the end of the furlough scheme, as for Shropshire's economy

they represent a point of difference for visitors from other areas. Continuing to support existing SMEs which provide a range of services and experiences to your communities and visitors and attracting more can be a real cornerstone for Shropshire and its economic future.

The council talks passionately about using data and insight to focus recovery planning. Data including the Economic Task Force's monitoring information; the Shropshire Business Impact Tracker; Citizen's Advice Shropshire data; and the unemployment and universal credit claimants data all build a rich picture for Shropshire. The council recognises that the future will continue to present challenges, including the impact of different coronavirus variants, so maintaining attention on these insights will enable the council to flex its approach. Additionally, the more the council can continue to do with partners to remove barriers to data sharing to create a shared and evidenced-based narrative for Shropshire the better placed it will be to make the case for the county's needs to Government and within the region.

Shropshire Council are considering how best to continue to work with Government into the future in order to deliver in line with the challenges and the opportunities for the county. For example, effective digital infrastructure is key for its communities and the council recognises that this will be an important factor in revitalising the rural economy. The panel discussed the value in developing a prospectus for Shropshire which clearly articulates a number of focused but crucial outcomes you want to deliver and what you require to do this. Developing a prospectus to articulate your economic strategy and demonstrate clearly how investment will deliver some important outcomes for the county will be helpful in making your case to Government.

The council describe the many assets of Shropshire and its opportunities including its location; natural features; and cultural offers. It recognises that it will need to focus its efforts on the outcomes it wishes to achieve by planning its economic strategy for the short, medium and longer term. There is an opportunity in the next 6 months to focus on a set of specific priorities; in the medium term for moving on from Covid-19 including the delivery of activities including the 2022 Commonwealth Games and Platinum Jubilee; and the delivery of the longer term strategy for the next 5/10 years. The next 6 months will be key, so take this opportunity to be clear about what the council wants to achieve and focus on these outcomes, as this clarity will be important for your partners and for your communities.

The panel discussed the importance of tourism and the visitor economy as part of Shropshire's economic strategy and that it will be undertaking some insights work this year which will provide some important reflections. The location of Shropshire: on the edge of the West Midlands conurbation; its border with Wales; and access to the North West remains a significant opportunity when marketing the area. There are significant assets within Shropshire including the outdoor spaces and experiences; local producers; and food and music festivals – and the council are keen to continue to emphasise these. The ambition of ensuring visitors take advantage of these assets by extending their visits over a number of days, rather than the current preference for day trips, is right. To support this, the council may want to focus on helping to connect the county's offers for its visitors and reflect on how it can offer a 'curated' experience for the needs of its different types of visitor such as foodies, walkers, adventure seekers and history lovers etc. over a weekend or longer break.

A good example of one of the area's important assets is its association with Charles Darwin. Internationally recognised, Shropshire can further build on this historical link and legacy to create a clear and unique offer for visitors. By selecting key unique assets such as this, including your medieval heritage (there are around 7000 listed buildings across the county), and making the most of them provides clarity for people to know what to expect from Shropshire and they will look at the place differently. Shropshire can look at how other areas have used their

associations with historical figures, for instance in Stratford-upon-Avon (William Shakespeare) and Medway (Charles Dickens) for examples of how to market these kinds of assets to visitors.

The Big Town Plan and Riverside development are important for Shrewsbury and provide further examples of where the council is working with partners to actively shape the place for the future for its existing communities and its visitor offer. The Big Town Plan considers the future of its important independent retail offer; heritage assets; active and green travel options; and its housing and commercial offers to create an attractive future proposition through regeneration. The council has made clear its ambitions of making the town increasingly visitor friendly and attracting inward investment.

The panel discussed opportunities in 2022 through the Platinum Jubilee and the Commonwealth Games. Although Shropshire is not hosting any of the Games' events or nations' training camps there is an appreciation of the huge opportunity which this still presents for the period of the Games and through its legacy with local sports clubs etc. The Games represents a chance to showcase what Shropshire can offer to a global audience of 1 billion people, through the baton relay, as well as maximising opportunities for the county's businesses when attracting visitors staying in Shropshire and travelling to other areas such as Birmingham (30 mins away by train) – and importantly by encouraging visitors to make a return visit. The council are planning how to capitalise on this in the lead up to the Games and generate a sustainable tourist offer for coming years.

Overall, our view is that Shropshire clearly recognises that it has an abundance of assets – both physical assets and ways of working – and the pandemic has created further opportunities. It will be important to focus on your key economic priorities for the short, medium and longer term and then 'sweat these assets'. The pandemic has demonstrated the important role of partnerships in addressing challenges and the council's important leadership role in this. Continuing to bring partners together can make a critical difference to the future of Shropshire's economy and set it aside from that of other areas. In the next phase of economic recovery you should be confident in articulating this and working with your partners to deliver a focused set of shared outcomes.

3. Next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect on this feedback. The council is encouraged to enter the findings into the public domain in due course.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils and we would be happy to discuss potential areas of additional support, advice and guidance. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk